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## ON THE LINGUISTIC AFFILIATION OF 'TAI LOI'

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### Abstract

This short investigation of languages referred to as Tai Loi shows that at least seven different languages from three Palaungic subgroups are referred to by this exonym. Simply meaning 'mountaineers', Tai Loi appears to denote Buddhist speakers as a sociopolitical identity rather than a linguistic one. As a linguistic designation, it may lead to confusion and should therefore be avoided. Since ISO 639 forms a part of the language tags distinguishing dialectal, regional and script variation in languages, there is the potential for even broader confusion.

**Keywords:** Tai Loi, Palaungic, Waic, Angkuic, exonyms

**ISO 639-3 codes:** tlq, ukk, blr, rbb, ril, pce, pll

### 1 Rationale

The term 'Tai Loi' has been used as a glottonym in various sources (cf. Simons 2017; Cott and Hardiman 1900, Edmondson 2008) and placed under the Angkuic branch of the Austroasiatic Palaungic languages. It is reported to be spoken in Myanmar, China and Laos (Simons 2017). Its ISO 639 code *tlq* labels Tai Loi as Austroasiatic, Mon-Khmer, Northern Mon-Khmer, Palaungic, Eastern Palaungic, Angkuic (Simons 2017). However, the name 'Tai Loi' has also been used of groups that are not classified as Angkuic. Lebar, Hickey and Musgrave (1964) report a common, non-specific usage of Loi. They state that the Shan sometimes call the Palaung 'Kunloi,' or 'mountaineer' (Ibid. 1964: 121), and the Buddhist Wa also have been called 'Tai Loi' and 'Hkun Loi' (1964: 129). Similarly, Scott and Hardiman (1900: 517) also refer to the phrase 'Tai Loi' as a generic term of reference to hill groups which have become Buddhist, but principally meaning Buddhist Wa. This note provides further examples of the usage of the glottonym *Tai Loi*, arguing that it does not refer to a specific language but rather is an umbrella term for both the Waic and Angkuic subgroups of Austroasiatic languages found in Myanmar, used in particular with those who are Buddhist, such as speakers of the dominant languages coining this exonym.

### 2 Angkuic languages

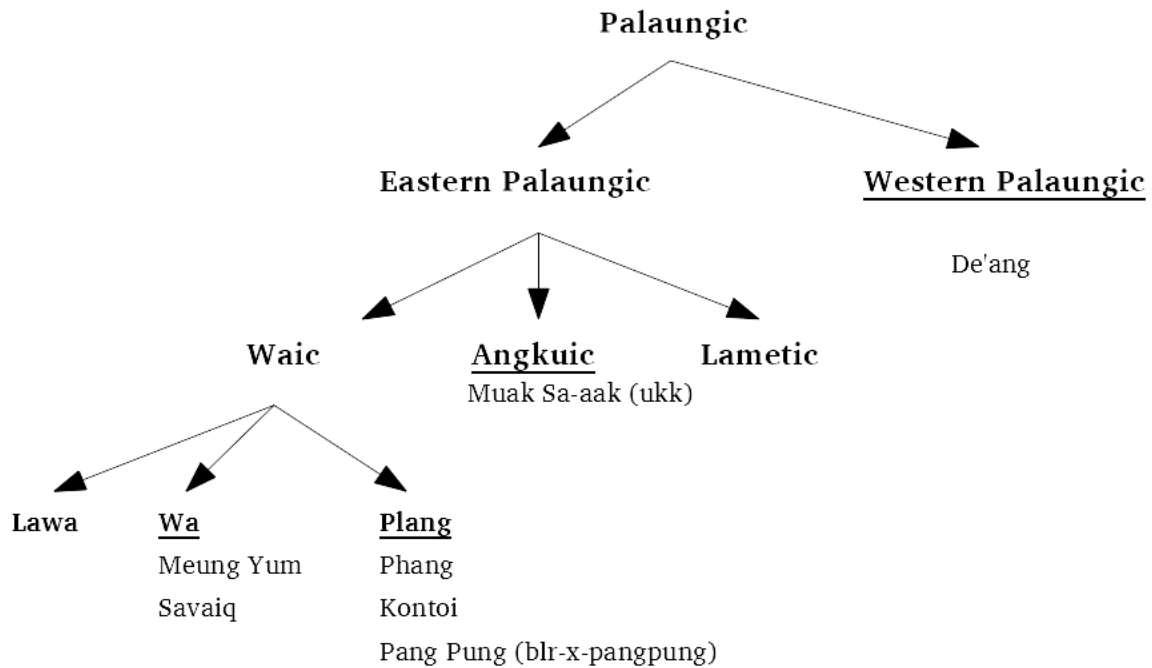
An Angkuic language found in Myanmar is Muak Sa-aak (ukk) (Hall 2010), labeled *Tai Loi* by Simons (2017). The Muak Sa-aak live primarily in Eastern Shan State of Myanmar, close to the Chinese border, and in the area of China across that border. They are mainly Buddhist. According to their speakers, they are typically called *Doi*. Like *Loi* in Shan, in their contact language, Tai Lue *Doi* means 'mountain'. The speakers also use *Doi* to refer to themselves, as most have forgotten their historical endonym for their language and people, *Muak Sa-aak*. Their language is best classified as Angkuic, as it shows the historical shift of voiceless initials to aspirated and voiced initials to voiceless. It also maintains the historical distinction between \*h- and \*s- initials that has been lost in the Palaungic languages outside of the Angkuic branch (Hall 2010).

### 3 Waic languages

The languages Meung Yum and Savaiq (no codes yet exist) have been classified as Wa languages (Myint Myint Phyu 2013). They may be called 'Wa' or 'Awa' (vwa) but include the exonyms, 'Loi', 'Loi Meung Yum', and 'Loi Lah' for Meung Yum, and 'Kon Loi' or 'Loi' for Savaiq. Thus, the term *Loi* is used for both of these Wa languages, Meung Yum and Savaiq. These groups also are primarily Buddhist (Myint Myint Phyu 2013).

Among the Blang or Plang (blr) languages, several have also been called *Doi* or *Loi*. In Paulsen’s (1992) historical reconstruction of three Plang languages spoken in Myanmar and China, one of them is called *Kontoi*, ‘mountain people’. The Plang variety *Phang* is called ‘Kham Doi’ by Thai speakers, using the generic term ‘mountain language’ (Diffloth 1992). Diffloth groups *Tai Loi* under Plang. Speakers of the Pang Pung variety of Plang of Myanmar report being called ‘Loi’ or ‘Doi’ as well<sup>1</sup>. This means there are at least five Waic language varieties labeled with the ‘mountaineer’ exonym *Loi* or *Toi/Doi*, namely, Meung Yum, Savaiq, Kontoi, Phang, and Pang Pung, as seen in Figure 1 (relevant subgroups are marked with bold underlined letters).

**Figure 1:** Classification of languages using the exonym ‘Loi’ or ‘Doi’



#### 4 Palaung

Edmondson (2008) reports there are ‘Tai Loi’ speakers in the Namhkam Township, Shan State, Myanmar area speaking De’ang, or Palaung, belonging to the Western Palaung branch of the Palaungic languages, although it is not clear which variety of De’ang (rbb, ril, pce, or pll). He further notes that these people were identified both by Shan and by themselves as Tai. Even though their language is not related to Tai, the adoption of Shan culture and religion appears to be more important than the designation as Palaung.

The location of these peoples called ‘Tai Loi’ is seen in Figure 2, showing the geographic distance separating them. Palaungic languages varieties that are not close together typically are very different from each other.

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with Jenvit Suknapasawat, April 20, 2016.

**Figure 2:** Locations of groups referred to as 'Tai Loi'.



## 5 Information Processing

The usage of the ISO 639 code *tlq* for 'Tai Loi' has the potential to result in information processing problems. ISO 639 codes are intended to be unique two- or three-letter codes to identify all known languages, with only one ISO 639 code per language. These codes also form the initial part of a language tag, as described in BCP 47 (Phillips and Davis 2009). Language tags are capable of conveying more information than ISO 639 codes alone; in particular, they allow for differentiation of variants, including dialectal, regional, script and others. For example, a language spoken in more than one country and written with more than one script can have only one ISO 639 code, but may be tagged differently for region and script using these identifiers in language tags.

Language tags are computing standards, supporting correct handling of information. Various types of information processing, including spell checking and speech synthesis, are dependent upon recognition of the language variety in use. Browsers also choose websites according to language preferences (Phillips and Davis 2009). The ability to differentiate between different scripts in use for the same language, or regional variation in script choice, is integral to these purposes as they involve written language. Incorrect or inconsistent language tagging will affect all of these areas, which has practical implications for usefulness of ISO 639 codes. Although not all language varieties with the same ISO 639 codes must be mutually intelligible, having an ISO 639 code such as *tlq* which may apply to various languages, some of which have other ISO 639 codes, creates the potential for confusion. Language tags are founded on the ISO 639 code and confusion there directly leads to confusion in the language tag. Correct language tags, however, can be very useful in disambiguating languages and language names, as they provide unique identifiers even to the dialect level and the writing system.

## 6 Summary

The sources discussed above show that the Tai exonyms *Loi* or *Doi* comprise Austroasiatic languages that belong to at least three different Eastern Palaungic subgroups, namely, Wa, Plang, and Angkuic, as well as to

Western Palaungic. Although speakers of these languages accept the name—indeed for some it is the only name they now know for themselves—it is not a useful term linguistically because it is used for many different languages which belong to various branches of the Palaungic languages, including the Wa and Bulang branches of Waic, Angkuic, and Palaung. Instead, Tai Loi appears to refer to a sociopolitical identity rather than a linguistic one and is a source of confusion. As suggested earlier by Lebar, Hickey and Musgrave (1964) and Scott and Hardiman (1900), it appears to be a name given by Tai language speakers to speakers of Palaungic languages who are Buddhists and have borrowed many of the customs of their Tai language speaking neighbors.

'Loi' can refer to related but different languages classified in different branches of the Palaungic languages, and tagging all of them using the same ISO 639 code *tlq* has the potential to cause problems; different languages could be tagged in the same way, and various languages tagged as *tlq* could be tagged with other ISO 639 codes in other places. The 'Tai Loi' languages should instead have their own unique language tags, and these should be used in place of *tlq*.

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